



A chance for a better life half a world away

Two UW-Stevens Point students have worked to secure Thai citizenship and offer a college education in Wisconsin to ‘stateless’ women in Thailand who are vulnerable to exploitation.

Deborah Ziff - Wisconsin State Journal

STEVENS POINT — In a yellow house in the center of the UW-Stevens Point campus, a dark-haired woman curls up on the couch during winter break.

Srinuan “Aor” Saokhamnuan wears black skinny jeans, a UW-Stevens Point sweatshirt and her hair pulled back fashionably with bangs, smiling widely as she talks about the math class she will start this week.

It’s a world away from the thatch-roof, plywood hut in Thailand where she was born.



Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Srinuan “Aor” (pronounced “Awe”) Saokhamnuan with her mother at her birthplace, just south of Mae Sai, Thailand.



Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Aor Saokhamnuan and Fongtip Boonsri prepare to leave Thailand to study in the U.S. after two UW-Stevens Point students got permission for them to travel. It’s a rare feat because the two women are not citizens anywhere and did not have the right to leave their district in northern Thailand. Children at the school where they volunteered cheer in the background.

There, she lived in the shadows as a refugee — not allowed to go to college, work legally or travel. She does not have a birth certificate. She is not recognized as a Thai citizen because her parents had fled Myanmar, leaving her with few rights and vulnerable to exploitation in the sex trade.

Saokhamnuan, 21, is one of the first beneficiaries of the Thailand Project, started by two UW-Stevens Point undergraduates to bring “stateless” people to study at the university.

Statelessness, or lack of citizenship, is a problem that affects an estimated 2 million to 3.5 million people in Thailand, according to Refugees International, and at least 12 million people worldwide. With nowhere else to turn, stateless women often are lured into prostitution.

UW-Stevens Point students Joseph Quinnell and Susan Perri beat long odds and persuaded the Thai government to allow Saokhamnuan and another woman, Fongtip Boonsri, 20, to study here.

“I thought, I can’t go. I don’t have anything ... even if I want to travel to another country or city, I can’t,” Saokhamnuan said. “So after I came here, I feel like this (is) my dream. And everything (is) fantastic. I have education.”

Thailand visit spurred idea

Quinnell, a photographer, got the idea for the project when he traveled to Thailand in the summer of 2005 to document child prostitution and human trafficking.

While there, he visited a school in northern Thailand founded by Sompop Jantraka, a two-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee. The school is meant to provide an alternative to sex work for stateless girls, but it cannot change their status.

“They understood that even after their education was complete, they would never be able to go on to a university,” Quinnell said. “They wouldn’t be able to get a job where they wouldn’t be paid under the table. They couldn’t leave their district. I met hundreds of children who weren’t allowed to dream of any future.”

In Thailand, lack of citizenship is the single greatest risk factor for a girl or woman to be sold or lured into prostitution, according to the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization.



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Less than a week into his trip, a woman called out to Quinnell from the doorway of her shop to ask if he wanted “boom-boom” — sex — with a smiling girl sitting next to her for \$15.

The girl looked to be about 12 years old, Quinnell said. He was appalled.

Quinnell, who said he was abused as a child growing up in Wisconsin Rapids, felt that he needed to do something for the girls at the school.

Families fled Myanmar

Both Saokhamnuan and Boonsri enrolled at Jantraka’s school in part to avoid being sold as sex slaves.

They grew up in Thailand’s northernmost province of Chiang Rai.

Their families come from Myanmar’s Shan hill tribe, a group that has been persecuted by the Myanmar government, according to Refugees International. The Shan and other tribes fled to Thailand in the 1980s. The government there allowed them to stay, but restricted them to a specific district and did not grant them refugee status, citizenship, or government identification.

Unable to work in factories without legal documents, their parents farmed or sold goods.

Soon after Boonsri left for Jantraka’s school at age 13, a man approached her mother asking if Boonsri wanted to work for him. It was unclear if that meant work in a restaurant or as a prostitute, but she didn’t want to find out.

“My mom knew if (I went with the man), maybe I come back and maybe not,” she said. Boonsri told her mother, “No, I want to study.”

The Thailand Project’s efforts pay off

It took more than three years for Quinnell and Perri to gain approval from Thai authorities to bring the women to UW-Stevens Point. Experts say it was quite a feat. “It’s extremely rare that stateless people can travel for educational purposes,” said Maureen Lynch, an expert on statelessness with Refugees International.

They returned to Thailand during winter and summer breaks, talking to the U.S. consulate, finding the right Thai officials to approach and raising more than \$50,000 for two scholarships in campaigns on the Stevens Point campus.

Saokhamnuan and Boonsri were working as volunteers at Jantraka’s school when Quinnell and Perri told them they had been chosen for the scholarships.

With backing from Jantraka and the U.S. consulate, Quinnell and Perri petitioned the Thai government to allow the women to study in the United States. Both Boonsri and Saokhamnuan got the travel visas they sought, but Boonsri also received an unexpected bureaucratic bonus: Thai citizenship.

The two women then had just one day to pack and say goodbye to their families and friends before getting on an airplane for the journey to Wisconsin, more than 8,000 miles away.

Challenges remain for pair

They arrived at the Central Wisconsin Airport in August 2008. Neither spoke English.

With three semesters of intensive English courses complete, the two women are now ready for their first college-level academic courses. The semester starts Monday.

They both plan to return to Thailand eventually. Boonsri wants to study psychology so she can counsel abused children.



Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Fongtip Boonsri smiles as she travels to Chiang Mai, Thailand, to apply for a Thai passport.

Saokhamnuan plans to major in communication so she can serve as a spokeswoman for Jantraka's efforts.

But while Boonsri has citizenship and the freedom to travel, Saokhamnuan's case is unresolved.

Her travel visa, which was already renewed once, cannot be renewed again and will expire this summer. Without it, she can't remain at UW-Stevens Point.

Quinnell, Perri, Boonsri and Saokhamnuan spent their winter break in Thailand trying to get Saokhamnuan a birth certificate, which is needed for citizenship. But proving her birth without any documentation is a difficult task.

"Usually governments are deaf and dumb to any plea about how this will destroy someone's life," said Julia Harrington, senior legal officer for the Equality and Citizenship program in the Open Society Justice Initiative, a human rights advocacy group. "They don't care."

Lawyers from the University of Bangkok, who are helping with Saokhamnuan's case, visited her village this month to gather

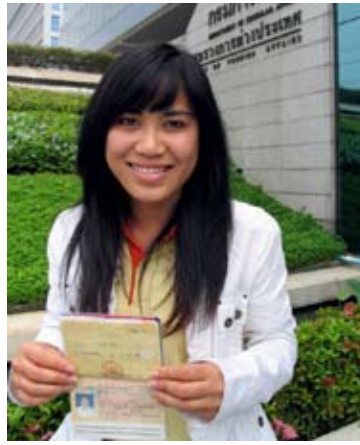


Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Aor Saokhamnuan was granted another year of travel by the government of Thailand in the summer of 2009. It allowed her to extend her studies in the United States.



Photo by Joseph Quinnell

After spending 19 years in Thailand, Fongtip Boonsri was granted Thai citizenship with help from the Thailand Project.

witnesses who can attest to her birth and early childhood in Thailand. Authorities will interview those witnesses this week.

If all goes well, Saokhamnuan's birthplace will be officially recognized as Thailand and her citizenship application will move forward.

If not, Quinnell said, they will just have to try again.

"The whole idea of doing this," Quinnell said, "we wanted to be able to gain citizenship for individuals through education – that the Thai government would see a young woman who's received a degree from a university in the U.S. as more valuable as a Thai citizen than as a prostitute."

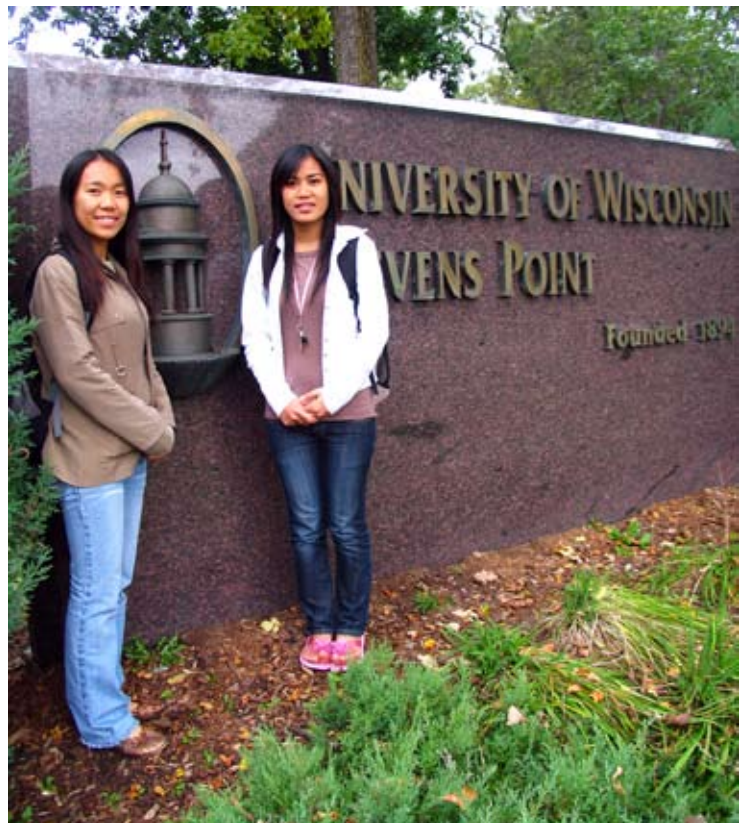




Photo by Matthew Mahon



Photo by Joseph Quinnell

Joseph Quinnell, who co-founded The Thailand Project, was recognized last year by the Clinton Global Initiative for his work to help Thai students get citizenship and a college education.

Susan Perri is a UW-Stevens Point student who co-founded The Thailand Project. The program helps Thai students get citizenship and travel to the U.S. to attend college.

Money needed to continue The Thailand Project

Students find funding for project; seek to create non-profit

UW-Stevens Point students Joseph Quinnell and Susan Perri have been faced with countless challenges as they've tried to kick-start the Thailand Project. Funding has been a constant source of worry.

But last month, they got an exciting gift from philanthropists in New York City: \$25,000 for scholarships and another \$35,000 for Quinnell and Perri to work for minimum wage on the project for one year.

The two have delayed graduation to continue to work on the project. Although the university has been supportive, allowing the Thai students to pay in-state tuition, it has not provided any money. The project needs about \$100,000 more to pay for Saokhamnuan and Boonsri's education through graduation.

Quinnell and Perri hope to create a nonprofit organization, expanding the program so that more stateless people can study at universities across the United States.

Former President Bill Clinton recognized the project last February through his Global Initiative, calling it an "affordable, doable program that could be replicated on every campus in America."

- Deborah Ziff

TIMELINE | Thailand Project

Summer 2005: Joseph Quinnell travels to Thailand to do photojournalistic research on child labor, prostitution and human trafficking.

Fall 2005: Quinnell returns to UW-Stevens Point with idea for Thailand Project. He meets Susan Perri, who becomes his partner on the project.

Winter 2005: Quinnell organizes a group of students from UWSP to travel to Thailand on a study abroad, service learning trip.

Spring 2006: Quinnell and Perri create a traveling photo exhibit on statelessness. UWSP administration agrees to accept stateless individuals, pending the granting of travel documents.

Fall 2007: Fundraiser raises more than \$14,000 in five days, finalizing two scholarships for the first year.

Summer 2008: Perri and Quinnell travel to Thailand to get the paperwork to bring Boonsri and Saokhamnuan to the U.S.

Fall 2008: Boonsri and Saokhamnuan arrive at UWSP and enroll in English as a Second Language classes.

Winter 2009: Thailand Project is highlighted by the Clinton Global Initiative.

Summer 2009: Saokhamnuan is given permission to travel for a second year.

Winter 2009-2010: Saokhamnuan, Boonsri, Perri and Quinnell return to Thailand to try to get Saokhamnuan a birth certificate.

HOW TO HELP

For more information or to donate online please visit:
www.TheThailandProject.org